THE YOUNG REPUBLIC'S SELF-IMAGE DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF JAMES KNOX POLK: A STUDY OF THE SWIFT UNFOLDING OF AMERICA'S SENSE OF DESTINY AND MISSION 1844-1849

by

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Those pioneers who first migrated to the New World in the seventeenth century brought with them a sense of specialty. They were not ordinary adventurers, no random sampling of those lands left behind. In fact, these people considered themselves sifted wheat among men, believing that God had bestowed upon them special advantages. With these advantages, furthermore, went the obligation to create a better society. As a result, the first Americans felt compelled to found the perfect civilization—a heaven on earth, so-to-speak. Such was not the case, for this theocracy, this Wilderness Zion, did not succeed. The foundation was laid, however, for future generations. These descendents were imbued with this sense of destiny and mission as were their predecessors.

Participation for the common man in this mission and destiny was delayed until the administrations of Andrew Jackson. Thomas Jefferson had given first impetus to the sense of American mission and destiny; however, his preachments had proved to be more theoretical than realistic. Jackson gave impetus to actual participation by the common man in political affairs, and a new emphasis was given to American mission and destiny. Men turned their eyes to the West and began to dream of increasing the physical size of the nation. The zenith of such activity came during the four years of James K. Polk's administration from 1845 to 1849.

At this time, Americans were given a new concept of mission through the phrase "manifest destiny." During the Texas and Oregon crises especially did Americans embrace the idea of territorial extension with God's blessing. James K. Polk, who was relatively

unknown by the rank and file, was elected President in 1844, and he became the instrument of activation for the American sense of destiny and mission. Polk, both a realist and a sincere proponent of manifest destiny, saw to the acquisition of Oregon, California, and New Mexico, engaging the country in a war with Mexico to get the latter two areas. Polk was no imperialist, however, and he successfully opposed seizure of Mexico and other Latin American territory after American successes in the war had led to such desires. Thus, Polk, a strong-willed, determined leader, successfully fulfilled his mission to make this nation stronger and to spread American institutions into the western territory.

The American sense of destiny and mission was quite apparent during the Congressional debates over the Oregon problem and during the Mexican War. Gradually, manifest destiny was subordinated by a new, more benevolent facet of the mission concept. It became the nations's task not only to expand its boundaries but also to spread its ideals and institutions. In time, it was felt, the entire world would be improved because of such enlightenment due to absorption of the American way. Of course, such acceptance did not take place immediately as hoped, and there is today still much resentment of this American sense of good-will throughout the world. None the less, because of this sense of mission, which has become a major credo of the American society, a better world is constantly sought and with perserverance possibly some day will become a reality.

PREFACE

Very little emphasis has been given in American historical writing to the sense of mission and destiny of the United States since the nation's beginnings, even though the theme as a national preoccupation is as old as the country itself. On the other hand, much has been written and re-written about "manifest destiny," a particular and more emotional facet of the deeper "mission sense" of the American people.

The term "manifest destiny" was first used in its present sense in 1845. This was also the year James Knox Polk became the eleventh President of the United States. And, most important to my purposes, it was at this time that the American sense of mission and destiny, inhering but dormant in the American people, received impetus and activation. For this reason, despite the dearth of material on this specific factor in American history, I selected the four years of Polk's administration as the years of America's emerging sense of mission and destiny, for he clearly played a primary role in this re-emphasis of such destiny. Polk was the instrument of activation which provided the materials for the deeper implications of the mission concept.

To Dr. Richard Bardolph, who suggested this fascinating topic after hearing of my interest in the presidency of Polk, I owe more than can be repaid, for his insights and suggestions have proved invaluable. I am especially grateful to my wife for her patience, understanding, sympathy, and suggestions, and to my baby daughter, whose timely arrival brightened the periods of frustration and despondency that always precede the realization of a fait accompli.

Q.C.L.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"There is a mysterious cycle in human events," said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on July 27, 1936. "To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." This statement could just as well have been made in 1790, 1827, 1846, 1860, or 1886. Americans have from the beginning harbored a feeling of such destiny——more, it would seem, than other peoples have. Until the 1840's this feeling was latent. In 1845, John L. O'Sullivan, writing in The New York Morning News, coined a phrase which enabled Americans in general to articulate this idea——"manifest destiny."

Unfortunately, the expression "manifest destiny" has come to represent something of which it was only a part. In the 1840's it applied only to the hoped-for geographical expansion of the territory of the United States. In time manifest destiny in this narrow sense seemed to represent a feeling of a general national spirit. But this, as Professor Merk has argued, was not the case. Rather

> A truer expression [than manifest destiny] of the national spirit was mission. This was present from the beginning of American history, and is present, clearly, today. It was idealistic, self-denying, hopeful of divine favor for national aspirations though not sure of it. It made itself heard most authentically in times of emergency, of ordeal, of disaster.[1]

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[1] Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 261.

Manifest destiny in the 1840's served as a vessel for the deeper sense of mission; it was a more overt and emotional (perhaps even vulgar) application of a deeper feeling—perhaps because that decade was quite conducive to vigorous emotionalism. Texas was annexed, the Oregon territory was acquired, the war with Mexico was fought, and James Knox Polk asserted himself as one of the strongest of the American Presidents.

This study, however, will not retrace these well-known events in American history, which have been adequately treated in numerous textbooks, monographs, and scholarly journals. It is my purpose to examine the motivation behind these events in order to ascertain the extent to which a sense of destiny and mission was involved. It will be a study of attitudes and convictions rather than of occurrences. Even though "manifest destiny" boasted many proponents, there were likewise many people who looked beyond mere territorial acquisition. Thus it was that during Polk's administration, Americans more seriously contemplated the future of their nation, and a sense of destiny and mission became fully intertwined in the young nation's self-image.

Certainly manifest destiny cannot be ignored in such a study, for it, too, was a part of the mission concept. Manifest destiny engendered a desire to spread and extend American institutions and ideals after expansion, and in this respect the basic mission-idealism expressed itself. Manifest destiny provided the impetus for less aggressive, but deeper, impulses than aspirations for territorial expansion.

The most representative contemporary group for such investigation proved to be the United States Congress. These men expressed the will of the people, and the record strongly suggests that they were quite aware of a sense of destiny and mission at this time.

Journals and newspapers of the period were illuminating. James Knox Polk, although reserved, serious-minded, and taciturn, nevertheless exhibited a sense of mission which profoundly influenced both this period and the country's longer future.

The sense of America's mission as expressed by the people of the 1840's in many instances was not admirable as we think of it today; however, it was, I think, usually sincere. And it must be remembered that only by this decade had the United States at least steadied its sense of national direction.

Jacksonian Democracy had in large measure incorporated the bulk of the American people into a close-knit political entity. Prosperity was returning in the 1840's after the panic of 1837. Further disagreement with Great Britain loomed ominously ahead. Americans, then, early convinced of a special Providential interest in their endeavors, searched vigorously for more explicit evidence of their unique status. Manifest destiny subsequently proved to be the initial stage of this search, followed by broader and more philosophical inquiry.

A rather perplexing problem recurred constantly in this study in regards to "manifest destiny" and overall destiny and mission. When individuals spoke of "our destiny" or "our mission," their intentions were sometimes unclear. Unquestionably the term "manifest destiny" time and again proved a useful tool in disguising blatant desires for seizure of territory. On the other hand, support for territorial expansion frequently was a sincere expression of a feeling of a profound sense of mission. Only the speaker knew the true meaning of his statement. None the less, it was possible to develop a definite pattern, and this pattern is, I think, quite logical.

The mission concept was conceived with the nation, brought to

birth in the 1840's, and is today an integral part of our national philosophy. A better understanding of American development will, I feel, entail more and more an understanding of this sense of destiny and mission so characteristic of the American people.

CHAPTER II

THE MISSION CONCEPT AND EARLY AMERICA

It would be folly to imply that the United States is the only nation which has, or has ever had, a sense of destiny and mission, but it may well be argued that this country is the only one which has so whole-heartedly accepted, endorsed, and promoted this belief. To illustrate, Hegel proposed a theory of the destiny of nations (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) in which he felt Germany would play the leading role, that of the pre-eminent "torch-bearer." Assuredly this theory was supported by many Germans, but——and this is the crux of the matter——at that time only a minority of Germans felt this sense of destiny and mission for their country.

Monarchy poses a serious barrier to this sense of mission within the people of a nation. This point need not be elaborated. Indeed, when Americans became fully aware of their destiny, democracy played a major role in the ensuing drama. So it was that when the first determined settlers arrived on America's shores, determined to construct a new society, they had instilled within them a sense of mission.

This mission concept was one at first of limited foresight. Eventually, though, a new interpretation of this idea was propounded by these innovators. In due time a sense of mission to redeem the Old World by high example was engendered in these idealistic pioneers. The potentialities of the new earth offered possibilities of building a new heaven. This idea appeared there-after in succeeding generations, with

changes, of course, in the particular type of mission, but with the sense of mission unaltered.[1]

The first pioneers were no ordinary breed, no random sampling of the countries they left behind. These people were searching for a new life—they were dissenters, dreamers, idealists, men and women who optimisticly concluded that their status was not commensurate with their capabilities or their birthright. These optimists, for almost none but optimists migrate to a new, wild land, were imbued with a sense of specialty. They considered themselves sifted wheat among men. Understandably, they were determined to perpetuate their concepts among their successors by creating a brave new world. The Puritans attempted this by way of a Wilderness Zion and failed, but not totally, for from the foundations of the Puritan society sprang the tenets of democracy, thus continuing this sense of destiny and mission.

Remarkable material achievement marked the opening of the eighteenth century in America, for which the colonists claimed entire credit. Furthermore, this sense of accomplishment enhanced the sense of common destiny, and this in turn encouraged them to maintain their rights regardless of any opposition.[2]

Opposition arose, and the Americans subsequently threw off the yoke of British colonialism. They reasoned that it was foreordained that America should be free, and that Americans should fully inaugurate a new society and government for the enlightenment of mankind. The mission theme was evident throughout the uncertain period that followed. Americans, being united by a common vagueness and a common effervescence, considered their first enterprise to be the discovery

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[1] Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission, p. 3.

[2] Charles M. Wiltse, The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), p. 280.

of who they were, where they were, what they were capable of, when they where, and how they could expand and organize.[3] The Constitution finally proved to be the cohesive force of union, despite the doubts entertained by many citizens of the new nation. The crisis was weathered, and Americans quickly adjusted themselves to their new surroundings. The mission sense gained momentum as the neophyte nation undertook to vindicate its raison d'être to the world.

The task of implementation was undertaken in the main by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson asserted that the individual was entitled to life, liberty, and the right of property. The ultimate goal of mankind was happiness, happiness based on intellectual development and recognition of the rights of others.

The conduit for achieving this goal was, as pointed out by Jefferson, Republicanism. Hence, the destiny and the mission of Americans, he reasoned, was to achieve, under Republicanism, a nation of small farmers, intelligent, self-sufficient agrarians happy in their work as Nature had intended. This conception of the self-sufficient farmer became a part of the American credo, and it existed until the twentieth century. The agrarian was the hero in the American social order, and the destiny of the nation was assumed to rest in his hands.

For Jefferson, the United States appeared to be a "nest" from which the two Americas, North and South, some day would be peopled.[4] He accepted the fact that the agrarian civilization would spread Republican ideals and institutions from this nest—it would be its mission to do so. But this expansion presented problems. How could it be

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[3] Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The National Experience (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 219.

[4] Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission, p. 9.

justified in terms of the provisions of the Constitution? Jefferson's first hurdle was overcome with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when he allowed his will to prevail over his strict constructionist tendencies. It was the destiny of the nation to expand farther westward and the mission of the American people to implant their civilization, customs, and concepts there. Such was his defense of the seeming departure from American traditions, but dissenting voices were heard.

Many Americans of the Revolutionary generation ascribed importance to territorial aggrandizement only as a means to an invaluable end——security.[5] This attitude was not necessarily a negation of the American sense of mission. American ideals and culture could be spread, it was argued, without occupation of additional territory.

Those who opposed expansion expressed three primary fears. First, they foresaw a destruction of the compact Union through a too-extended territory. Second, they argued that such territorial enlargement would prove injurious to the liberties of the existing individual states. Third, inhabitants of these distant sections would subvert the liberties of their eastern fellow citizens. That these fears in the long run proved unfounded goes without saying, but such doubts persisted in a covert form for some time afterwards, even when expansion was undertaken with total conviction.

The westward movement of Americans became increasingly active in the 1820's and 1830's. In the South, new lands were needed to replace those depleted by the staple crops and poor agricultural practices. Large-scale Indian removals were undertaken to spread the boundaries

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[5] Albert K. Weinberg, Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), p. 20.

of available western lands. More and more people were succumbing to the beckoning of western territory. Indeed, "America was so fertile a repository of hopes because it was so attractive a locale for illusions. The map of America was full of blank spaces that had to be filled." And so as Americans discovered where they were and what they had to work with, they expected their nation to grow.[6]

With this increasing enchantment regarding the West went a corresponding increase in the sense of mission. The desire for adventure, the belief that it was manly for a youth to set forth in search of his fortune, the conviction that there would be the reward of some Holy Grail affected a larger percentage of Americans than at any other time. The dominant altruism was patriotism; territory would be opened for settlement by exploration, and American institutions would be spread.[7] Those who traveled toward the setting sun were convinced that theirs was a special purpose, for

> Enshrined in expansionism...was this dogma of the special mission. Moral idealism divested of all intent of sacrilege the half-belief that God, who walked with Noah, rode with the American pioneer in his journies over the continent. Even theological literature was scarcely more abundant in reference to Providence than was the literature of expansion.[8]

These pioneers were quite sincere and earnest in their sense of mission. It was God's will for them to inherit this portion of the earth, and if God was for them (and there was no doubt of this in their minds), who

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[6] Boorstin, The National Experience, p. 223.

[7] Carl R. Fish, The Rise of the Common Man 1830-1850, Vol. VI of A History of American Life, ed. Arthur Meir Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), 294-295.

[8] Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, p. 128.

could be against them? As one scholar has aptly remarked, "To suppose that this expansion was due simply to a desire for territorial aggrandizement and increase of territory is to misinterpret all American history. . . ."[9]

Change, a striking feature of American life throughout the first three centuries, was never so extensive or so significant as during the democratic era of the first half of the nineteenth century. Thanks to a rapid succession of diplomatic and military triumphs in these decades, the territorial limits of the United States were rounded out. The filling of this vast domain behind the ever westward-moving frontier of settlement resulted in the extraordinary spatial and social mobility that perhaps was the most important fact of the era.[10]

Jacksonian Democracy had unleashed the common man from his confining bonds of social obscurity, and he was quick to respond to this new freedom. As is often the case in such circumstances, the average man readily and wholly accepted expansion westward as America's destiny and as his mission. And if he did not migrate himself, he encouraged and supported those who did. Foreigners were duly impressed with this American vigor. Many British travelers expressed confidence that some day the United States would extend as far south as Panama, or even Cape Horn. To the north, the absorption of Canada was a foregone conclusion. Instead of a United States of America, the future would see the United Republics of America.[11]

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[9] George P. Garrison, Westward Extension 1841-1850, Vol. XVII of The American Nation: A History, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 3.

[10] Stow Persons, American Minds: A History of Ideas (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 147.

[11] Max Berger, The British Traveller in America 1836-1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 185.

No longer was there incompatibility between democracy and the increased American domain. By the 1840's there had grown up the popular ideology of expansionism centered in democracy. Furthermore, the idea of individualism which had erupted during the 1830's more than anything else probably cemented the association between democracy and expansion.[12] The American in the 1840's was hyper-receptive to his democracy. He was convinced that it was far and away the best system of social organization. The greater the number of people touched by this democracy, then, the better. He became enamored of this system, of his mission, and of himself. ". . .the American approached perilously close to changing the traditional dogma, that man exists ad maiorem gloriam Dei, into the heresy that God exists ad maiorem gloriam hominis."[13] Furthermore, "To see the growth of the nation as the inevitable filling of obviously predestined bounds is to miss the peculiar confusion, the peculiar hope, and the peculiar promise of American thinking about the national future. . . ."[14]

The stage was thus set for the premier performance. In 1844, James K. Polk of Tennessee——a Jacksonian, a proponent of annexation of Texas and Oregon, a man with a mission——was nominated by the Democratic Party as its Presidential candidate. Relatively unknown by the rank and file, Polk's nomination was a distinct surprise, and he is more often remembered because he was the first "dark horse" candidate rather than for his performance as President. This is unfortunate; Polk was a most capable executive, and he had striking success as President. He took office in confident but troubled times and accepted the challenges afforded him. The spirit of the times can best be summed up by two contemporary observers. One

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12 Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, pp. 107, 101, 116.

13 Ibid., p. 129.

14 Boorstin, The National Experience, p. 272.

proudly acknowledged that

> The people of the United States have been placed by Providence in a position never before enjoyed by any other nation. They are possessed of a most extensive territory, with a very fertile soil, a variety of climates and productions, and a capacity of sustaining a population greater in proportion to its extent than any other territory of the same size on the face of the globe.[15]

On the other hand, a famous poet commented on the ideals of the time:

> 'Parson Wilbur he call all these arguments lies;
> Sez they're nothin' on airth but jest fee, faw, fum;
> An' thet all this big talk of our destinies
> Is half on it ign'nance, an' t' other half rum...'[16]

Polk, then, had a rendezvous with destiny, a rendezvous of profound significance in the history of America.

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[15] Albert Gallatin, Writings, ed. Henry Adams, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), III, 581.

[16] James Russell Lowell, Essays, Poems, and Letters, ed. William Smith Clark, (New York: Odyssey Press, 1948), p. 232.

CHAPTER III

MISSION, DESTINY, AND JAMES KNOX POLK

The Presidential campaign and the election of 1844 were, to say the least, of prime importance. The Texas question, which had been obscured by the panic of 1837 and the consequent hard times, was being revived. The probable candidates for the Presidency, Clay of the Whigs and Van Buren of the Democrats, had met in Raleigh, North Carolina, to discuss the status of Texas in the forth-coming election. Neither wanted the Texas question to be paramount in the campaign; as a result, both men agreed not to bring up this problem. It was not, however, Texas that would be Van Buren's nemesis, as he was soon to discover. And Clay was to find that the Texas "monster" did not die so easily.

If Van Buren did not desire to discuss Texas, his party most definitely did, especially those from the South and the West. Robert J. Walker of Mississippi was thus able to block Van Buren's nomination at the convention by employing the two-thirds majority rule adopted in 1836 but not utilized until 1844. Van Buren's support was not sufficient to surmount this obstacle. After a stalemate, James Knox Polk of Tennessee was nominated by the expansionist wing of the party; he won the nomination, thus becoming the nation's first "dark horse" candidate.

Polk, as pointed out previously, was not well-known in the country, but he called for what a majority of the voters seemingly wished to hear. In the famous "Bargain of 1844," Polk, hoping to please all Democratic sections of the nation, declared for the annexation of Texas and a reduced tariff to gratify the South, and for the "re-occupation" of Oregon and

a rivers and harbors bill to appeal to the Northwest. It was this formula that the Democratic platform incorporated.

Clay was, as expected, nominated by the Whigs, and initially appeared to be the candidate who would become the next President, but he made a fatal mistake. Having earlier repudiated discussion of the annexation of Texas, he re-evaluated the situation, and sensing the strength of the annexation appeal, called for annexation of Texas if Mexico approved. The Whigs were thunder-struck, and then angry. In New York, finally, Clay lost enough Whig support to James G. Birney of the Liberal, or Liberty, Party thus enabling Polk to carry the state and to win the election.

Providence, it was felt, had again pointed the way. A man favoring further territorial expansion was President, and this man had a sense of mission as dedicated as that of any of his constituents.

James Knox Polk, born in Mecklenberg County, North Carolina, in 1795, gave at first little evidence of future greatness. He studied law at the University of North Carolina, was admitted to the bar in 1820, and moved to Tennessee, where he established his practice. A staunch supporter of Andrew Jackson, Polk won a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 1824. Ten years later he became Speaker of the House.

In 1839 he gave up that office to seek the governorship of Tennessee and was elected. After 1841, he returned to private law practice but was nominated by the Democratic Party as its Presidential candidate in 1844.

Whether serious or sarcastic, the Whig inquiry "Who is James K. Polk?" was answered posthaste. Without actually realizing it, Americans in 1844 had elected a man who was to prove one of the most successful and conscientious of the Presidents. As an expansionist, Polk proved his mettle, for more territory was added to the United States during his administration than in any other, with the exception of Jefferson's. But he was more than an expansionist. He was a man with a dream.

It was a dream that the American people as a whole shared, a dream of the nation's growing mission to the world. In the 1840's, this mission was, in its more unrefined form, synonymous with expansion, and Polk became its instrument of action. In considering this development, Morison discerned that

> Nobody really knows why Americans vote the way they do, and often they don't understand it themselves. ...in this instance, a growing conviction of America's 'manifest destiny' to expand West to the Pacific and South to at least the Rio Grande brought victory to obscure Polk over radiant Clay.... America was on the move, and anyone who objected, be he Mexican, European, or Whig, had better get out of the way! The prospect of acquiring Texas, Oregon, and California appealed to simple folk who were recovering confidence after the hard times of 1837-41. They wanted all three, and Polk got them. If vox populi, vox dei, Polk was the Almighty's choice....[1]

Polk, despite the mystical trappings of the American mission and dream, was a realist, averse to soft romanticism. He wanted land for man's purposes, not for those of Providence. But he not only believed in manifest destiny; he also believed that it was the finger of God which pointed it out.[2] It was his mission, then, to heed the plain purposes of God, but at the same time he would be careful to keep his feet solidly on the ground of realism.

Polk, unfortunately, left very meager personal records of his thoughts and convictions. His diary is official in nature, painfully so, and little by way of emotional or intimate reflections and attitudes is revealed. Indeed, Polk often used the third person in referring to himself. His diary, actually, could have been composed by an impartial

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1 Samuel E. Morison, The Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 557.

2 Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission, p. 61; Fish, Rise of the Common Man, p. 302.

observer for all the personal insight it contains. This circumstance necessitates a more penetrating examination of Polk's messages as President and a more careful study of secondary source materials.

Polk, upon assuming the office of President, now fully able to implement his dream of America's mission, was immediately frustrated by an act of his predecessor. President Tyler had sent a resolution to the Congress requesting that Texas be invited to become a state of the Union. This resolution passed Congress by a vote of one-hundred twenty to ninety-eight in the House and by twenty-seven to twenty-five in the Senate. The Senate vote, it will be noted, fell far short of the two-thirds majority required for the ratification of treaties, hence the resort to the device of employing a joint resolution rather than a treaty as the means for accomplishing annexation. And so, as his last official act, Tyler on the final day of his administration sent word to Texas's President Houston that the consent of Texas alone was now necessary to enable the Lone Star Republic to become the twenty-eighth state. Although doubts as to ratification at first were in the minds of Houston and his Secretary of State,[3] a prompt reply in the affirmative was forthcoming.

Polk had to look elsewhere for his first fruits, but this was hardly a problem, especially for a man of such intense determination and drive. In his Inaugural Address, the new President did not hesitate to give impetus to his sense of mission and destiny. "In assuming [these] responsibilities so vast I fervently invoke the aid of that Almighty Ruler of the Universe in whose hands are the destinies of nations and men to guard this Heaven favored land against the mischief which without His guidance might arise from an unwise public policy."[4] It is clear, then,

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[3] Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1907), p. 146.

[4] James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1908), IV, 373-374.

that the later occurrences in Polk's administration concerning Oregon, Mexico, and California were not the result of acts of carelessness or of irrationality. Polk from the first knew what he wanted, what destiny had decreed, and determined to fulfill that mission.

Continuing, Polk made a statement which could leave no doubt as to what he considered his, and the country's, calling. "Our Union is a confederation of independent States whose policy is peace with each other and all the world." Then, most significantly, "To enlarge its limits is to extend the dominions of peace over additional territories and increasing millions."[5] Here was revealed that particular concept of national duty and purpose which went beyond mere extension of territory. This idea that the enlargement of our borders would bring the much more important extension of American political and social ideals was the focal point of the genuine sense of mission. In the 1840's, of course, this facet of the mission dream, though it generally was unintentional, was quite often vulgarized, and drained of its idealistic content. It was in this way that manifest destiny and destiny and mission became enmeshed, even though the former was simply a less sophisticated extension of the latter.

Polk apparently was a victim of a near-obsession, as were many Americans of the decade, the result, perhaps, of the United States' coming of age. The high idealism of mission more than ever had to be employed, and manifest destiny was the perfect solution. As we shall see later, there were those dedicated to America's mission who had serious reservations about manifest destiny as a sincere expression of that mission. For the moment, however, the majority would rule.

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[5] Ibid., p. 380.

Most Americans, with the exceptions noted, supported President Polk's determination to fulfill the country's destiny, and they were quite sincere. Of course, disillusionment with Polk would emerge from time to time, but it seems that this is the general rule rather than the exception in the case of Presidents.

Americans, guided by their President, took stock of the task before them. Who was to receive the beneficent light of American democracy and civilization? Who would be so blessed and immersed in "the American way?"

There were several candidates. Americans found it quite difficult to believe, for example, that Canadians would be content to remain in the seclusion of their Arctic wilderness when the warm sun of American democracy beckoned, unless they were compelled to do so.[6] In January 1845, an article written in a Boston periodical with national circulation on "British Colonial Politics" made reference to Canada:

> The hope of freedom, of establishing a government of their own, is perhaps increasing. That such a consumation may happen at the proper time, all may wish without proper offense. It is to this end that all effort should be directed. These colonies must become a nation by themselves, or form a part of ours. Laws which man cannot alter have fixed a limit to colonial dependence.[7]

Canadians were able, nevertheless, to resist the "warm sun of American democracy." Interest soon was intently focused on the Far West and the Southwest, for it seemed inevitable that America's destiny would include these areas.

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[6] Fish, Rise of the Common Man, pp. 291-292.

[7] The North American Review (Boston: Otis Broaders and Co., 1845), LX, 124.

Polk wrote to historian George Bancroft, his Secretary of the Navy, and an avowed proponent of America's manifest destiny, that "There are four great measures which are to be the measures of my administration: one, a reduction of the tariff; another, the independent treasury; a third, the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute; and lastly, the acquisition of California."[8] Unlike most of his predecessors or successors, Polk accomplished each one of these Presidential aspirations. But this fact is not surprising, considering the man.

Polk's mind, it has been said, was rigid, narrow, obstinate, far from first rate. He sincerely believed that Democrats alone were truly American, that Whigs were either the dupes or the pensioners of England, and that not only were wisdom and patriotism Democratic monopolies, but honor and breeding as well. Pompous, suspicious, secretive, he had no humor, could be vindictive, and saw "spooks and villains." But if his mind was narrow, it was also powerful, and he had enormous courage. Despite his political orthodoxy, he had absolute integrity and could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. He knew how to get things done, the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, the second.[9]

Polk had few friends or close associates; no one really knew the man. His closest friend was the Presidency itself, and this companion demanded all his time. Polk acquiesced, for the Presidency played the major role in the carrying out of his mission. Along with this strong

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[8] James K. Polk, Diary of a President 1845-1849, ed. Allan Nevins, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

[9] Bernard DeVoto, The Year of Decision 1846 (Little, Brown and Co., 1943), pp. 7-8.

determination to make his own decisions and to be the dominant force of his administration, Polk brought to the office of the Presidency a sincere respect for the basic liberal traditions of the Constitution, seasoned with a kindly regard for the welfare of his fellow citizens.[10] The American people were, it would appear, fortunate in their choice of an instrument to carry out the mission and fulfill the destiny of the nation.

At this point consideration should be given to another important factor which influenced the expansionist psychology of Polk and the majority of the American people. Earlier, it had been feared that the Union's existence would be jeopardized by expansion, but by the time Texas requested permission to enter the Union, it was apprehended that the Union might be endangered by failure to expand through annexation of Texas. The Southern states especially considered Texas to be necessary to their economic security, the security of their "peculiar institution," and to the preservation of their balance of political power with the North. Thus, in large measure, the expansionism of the 1840's came about as a defensive effort to forestall the encroachment of Europe in North America.[11] This too was in keeping with the sense of mission. American institutions, not European, would enlighten the peoples involved; therefore, mission and destiny demanded the exclusion of European influence in North America.

The Democratic Party in the election of 1844, unlike the silent Whigs, had in fact declared unequivocally that the title of the United States to the whole of Oregon was clear and unquestionable. No portion of this territory, moreover, ought to be ceded to England, or to any

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[10] Charles A. McCoy, Polk and the Presidency (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960), p. 55.

[11] Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, pp. 113, 109.

other power.[12] On the question of Texas, the Democratic Party had been similarly explicit. Here the Whigs were not mute. In a special message to the Vermont legislature in 1844, Governor Slade argued that

> Such is the proposition for the annexation of Texas into this union—involving a question of much more importance than whether the territory to be added shall form one or five states, or whether they shall be slave or all free states, or equally divided between these opposite and irreconcilable elements of power. It is a question whether, by an act of arbitrary power, Vermont shall be forced, without her consent into a federal union with a state or states, not admissable by the compact into which she has entered.[13]

Throughout the following five years, the Whigs consistently expressed the fear that the Constitution was being violated and the Union destroyed. The Whigs, though, were in the minority, and they were wholly unable to contend with Polk's determined efforts.

Polk considered enforcement of the Monroe doctrine part of his mission. In his first Annual Message delivered on December 2, 1845, he said

> ...European governments may learn how vain diplomatic arts and intrigues must ever prove upon this continent against that system of self-government which seems natural to our soil, and which will ever resist foreign interference.... Oregon is a part of the North American continent, to which, it is confidently affirmed, the title of the United States is the best now in existence.[14]

Discussion in Congress which resulted from this assertion will be examined in following chapters. Suffice it to say now that Polk had taken his stand with, it seemed, no intention of yielding.

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12 Samuel F. Bemis, ed., The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), V, 192-193.

13 Niles' National Register, (Baltimore), 16 Nov. 1844, LXVII, 215.

14 U.S., Congress, The Congressional Globe 1833-1873, ed. Francis P. Blair, et al., (Washington: Blair and Reeves, 1846), 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 5; Richardson, Messages of the Presidents, IV, 397.

He turned his attention next to California. This was the "promised land" for Polk, more so than Oregon or Texas, but, unlike Oregon, California was not disputed territory; without question it belonged to Mexico.

California had emerged during Tyler's Presidency from its previous obscurity to take an important place in the minds of Americans. As yet, however, when Polk became President, California still remained secondary to Oregon and Texas.[15] Polk, who was more aware of the popular mind than were his advisors, firmly believed that Americans also wanted California as well as Texas and Oregon,[16] and he immediately initiated his plan to secure it.

There is hardly any question today, perhaps, that Polk indirectly precipitated war with Mexico. He wanted California; he felt it was America's destiny in following Providential guidance. To him, manifest destiny certainly meant Texas and Oregon, but it meant California as well. With this fact clearly in mind, he marshaled his authority and forces to achieve his objective. If it could be done peacefully, well and good; but it would be achieved by war if necessary.[17] There are those who contend, and their argument is forceful, that Polk baited Mexico into war over the Texas boundary question in order to get California, having concluded that Mexico would not sell California.[18]

One must remember, nevertheless, in all fairness to Polk, that even though he did not hesitate to go to war with Mexico over California, still he did approach the Mexicans in reference to a peaceful settlement

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[15] Bemis, American Secretaries of State, V, 198.

[16] DeVoto, The Year of Decision, p. 8.

[17] McCoy, Polk and the Presidency, pp. 221-222.

[18] Morison, Oxford History, p. 561.

and on terms which would not concern any indisputable Mexican territory, that is, territory south of the Rio Grande.[19] He also sent John Slidell as an emissary to Mexico in hopes of establishing better relations between the two countries, but Slidell was not received.

Polk's conscience was clear, and he was now convinced that California would have to be taken by force in effecting his mission and the nation's destiny. He was, moreover, still able to maneuver Mexico into the position of appearing to be the aggressor.

Although the Mexican government deemed its control of Texas irretrievably lost, its leaders insisted that the southern boundary of Texas was the Nueces rather than the Rio Grande River. When Polk ordered an American force under General Zachary Taylor into this disputed area between the two rivers, a Mexican force crossed the Rio Grande and on April 24, 1846, offered sharp resistence to a detachment of the American troops, killing several men and capturing others. On May 9, word of this clash was received by the President, and two days later Congress, at his urging, declared war on Mexico.

With respect to California, Polk had not been idle, for in October 1845 he had appointed Thomas O. Larkin as a confidential agent who was instructed to go to California, stir up the populace against Mexico, and encourage them to seek annexation to the United States or to establish their independence under American protection.[20] Within a year, following the Kearney expedition and the "Bear Flag Revolt," California was secured for America.

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19 Samuel F. Bemis, A Diplomatic History of the United States (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1955), pp. 235-236.

20 Edward Channing, A History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1905-1925), V, 568, 569.

In his war message to Congress, Polk used his now-famous "American blood on American soil" logic to justify his actions. In his words, "The Mexican government. . .after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil."[21] Admittedly, this logic was questionable and weak. The Whigs especially were critical of the declaration of war, but Polk was adamant and the war declaration was voted by the Democratic-controlled Congress.

The prosecution of the war was even more successful than most Americans had anticipated. As victory after victory was achieved, there naturally developed a strong sentiment for the retention of what Mexican territory had been conquered and a willingness to find justification for such action in the intentions of Providence.[22] By 1847, this movement to take all of Mexico, and perhaps other territory to the South,[23] became a serious problem. As one author commented, "The West had cast a glamor over the eyes of the nation, and the greater the distance, the more alluring the prospect." However, at this juncture Polk intervened. Oregon, Texas, and California were definitely secured, and Polk was satisfied. He thus hastened peace negotiations in order to see that the fever of expansion did not rise too high.[24]

By these actions, Polk seems to be an enigma. Was he not compromising his values and endangering America's manifest destiny? Was he

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21 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 782.

22 Bemis, American Secretaries of State, V, 294.

23 For an excellent account of this movement, see Chapter V of Merk's Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History.

24 Ephraim D. Adams, The Power of Ideals in American History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913), p. 86.

not negating the successes achieved by the American forces in Mexico? The answer to these questions in actuality is quite obvious if Polk's overall sense of mission is understood.

Polk was by any test a proponent of manifest destiny, and he did pursue war in order to get California and to guarantee Texas's status as a new state. But he was not, one feels, an imperialist. He sincerely believed that Providence had ordained the expansion of the United States to include California, Texas, and Oregon, but not the whole of Mexico. He accomplished what his sense of mission had compelled him to undertake.

In his second Annual Message, delivered on December 7, 1847, Polk pointed out that "No country has been so favored, or should acknowledge with deeper reverence the manifestations of the Divine Protection." Indeed, "an all-wise Creator directed and guarded us in our infant struggle for freedom, and has constantly watched over our surprising progress, until we have become one of the great nations of the earth." He also carefully reiterated that

> The doctrine of no territory is [that] of no indemnity; and if sanctioned would be public acknowledgment that our country was wrong, and that the war declared by Congress with extraordinary unanimity, was unjust, and should be abandoned—an admission unfounded in fact, and degrading to the national character.[25]

All were not so convinced, however, of this right. The author of the satirical Biglow Papers declared that

> 'They may talk o' Freedom's airy tell they're pupple in the face,—
> It's a grand gret cemetary fer the barthrights of our race; They just want this Californy
> So's to lug new slave-states in
> To abuse ye, an' to scorn ye, an' to plunder ye like sin.'[26]

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[25] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 4, 5.

[26] Lowell, Essays, Poems, and Letters, p. 225.

Yet Lowell and other critics, who like him, accused Polk of being a mere tool of the slavery interests, little realized that the President firmly refused to support the extreme Southern programs, denounced the actions of John C. Calhoun in his use of the slavery question while Secretary of State, and wished to extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific. He felt, with no discernable regret, that it seemed impossible that slavery should ever exist in any part of the territory acquired from Mexico.[27]

It is certainly understandable that Polk has been ranked as one of the great Presidents. "Probably at no other time in our history," notes Polk's political analyst, "has the country been governed so extensively by one man."[28]

Polk was a leader of men. When there was a final decision to be made, he remained adamant, even if it meant opposing members of his own cabinet, as when the leading members——Buchanan, Bancroft, Marcy, and Walker——desired even greater territorial expansion.[29]

James Knox Polk had a vision of American greatness, and his mission was to ensure the attainment of that destiny. As a result, the position of the United States today as the world's most powerful nation is in no inconsiderable measure attributable to the eleventh President, a strange man, but, incontestably, a determined one.

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[27] Polk, Diary, p. xvi.

[28] McCoy, Polk and the Presidency, p. 70.

[29] Ibid., p. 220.

CHAPTER IV

MISSION, DESTINY, OREGON, AND MEXICO

If James K. Polk was an instrument of America's mission and destiny in the decade of the "fabulous forties," Oregon and Mexico (because of California) became the modi operandi for this sense of mission. Involved was a melange of feeling. To some, the thrill of seeing vast territorial expansion was the dominant factor, while to others the chance to witness the proliferation of American society and of its political forms was most important. Whatever the case, at no other time before in the nation's history had there been such intense preoccupation and concern with America's destiny and the mission of its people.

Integrated into the mission complex was an additional ingredient, an ingredient which made the mission of Americans the more imperative. Manifest destiny was a strong factor in annexation sentiment, but a more significant argument was found in the national jealousy of England.[1] England was rapidly becoming——perhaps we should say was again becoming——anathema to the United States. There still existed in the young nation deep suspicions of the former mother country, compounded with a sense of awe.

At the beginning of the decade, the United States and Britain had succeeded in resolving the problem of the Maine-Canadian boundary dispute, but a much more serious conflict appeared imminent, for the Oregon problem remained.

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[1] Adams, The Power of Ideals, p. 80.

There is no need in this study to summarize the Oregon problem, for it is adequately handled in any competent study of American history. What must be examined in this respect is the consuming sense of mission to spread the American way of life in the territory of the Northwest. Great Britain had a strong position in that area and seemed determined to remain. But the United States, declared Americans, was destined to occupy this western area of the continent—this was the mission of its people.

The complex dilemma was exacerbated because the legal possession of the Oregon territory was so nebulous. Both nations had implanted settlements in this vast area, and each claimed a legitimate right to do so. None the less, neither country could declare without reservation that its claim on Oregon was the only rightful one.

This fact was acknowledged by many Americans. Continual reference is made throughout the Congressional debates, regarding Oregon, to old Spanish claims, international law, and natural rights. Americans were seeking justification for their claims; their mission ultimately became this justification.

A respected contemporary of the day, Albert Gallatin, who had served on Jefferson's cabinet, insisted that

> It has, it is believed, been conclusively proved that the claim of the United States to absolute sovereignty over the whole Oregon territory, in virtue of the ancient exclusive Spanish claim, is wholly unfounded.... Beyond the naked assertion of an absolute right to the whole territory, so little in the shape of an argument has been adduced, and so much warmth has been exhibited in the discussion of the subject, that it cannot be doubted that the question has now become on both sides one of feeling rather than of right.[2]

Gallatin's is probably a most concise evaluation of the situation in the

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[2] Gallatin, Writings, III, 501, 514.

mid-1840's. An acrimonious tension grew between the two countries. War appeared to be a not unlikely possibility. The first severe trial of America's mission philosophy was manifest.

In Congress, the discussion of the Oregon question for months dominated all other undertakings. Every possible aspect of the problem was examined. Most disconcerting to the majority of these men was the specter of war with Great Britain, recognized at the time to be the most powerful nation in the world. Twice before Americans had successfully waged war with Great Britain; would such success prevail a third time? Needless to say, these somber prospects were taken into full consideration. Yet for many the sense of mission and the feeling of America's destiny eradicated any fears of Britain. Once more it was reasoned that if God was for them, who could be against them. Perhaps they relied on the words of the Psalmist who had declared "Our fathers hoped in Thee; they trusted in Thee, and Thou didst deliver them (Psalm 22:4)." In any case, a majority of the men concerned believed that mission and destiny would prevail. Not only was there involved a question of territorial expansion: the very meaning of the Republic was felt to be at stake.

Those who hesitated so to challenge Britain readily evaluated the mission philosophy somewhat differently. They reasoned that the United States was certainly destined to spread into the western territory. If Providence had ordained this, why precipitate matters and risk an unncessary war? If it were indeed God's will for Americans to people the North American continent, then God would check any foreign interference. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, for example, opposed any actions which might so antagonize Great Britain; besides, Great Britain was a reasonable nation with which a compromise could be reached.[3]

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[3] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, passim, 126, 127.

More utilitarian arguments were voiced by numerous Southerners, who were developing their own sense of mission. Southern leaders, who were gratified with the gain of Texas into the Union, desired to minimize expansionist sentiment (which they had so effectively utilized in the Texas question) regarding Oregon.[4] Any conflict with Britain would endanger Texas, for British interests in Texas were well known. Southern leaders recognized this potential threat, and they joined the minority Whigs in predicting ominous consequences should Great Britain and the United States go to war.

Quite noticeable was the fact that numerous Southerners had no qualms several months later in engaging Mexico in a war. They acknowledged that Great Britain was far more powerful than Mexico and urged a practical consideration of the choices available. Representative Isaac E. Holmes of South Carolina quite clearly expressed the dominant Southern viewpoint. Whatever might be said of his bravery on the recent Texas question, he felt, on the question of Oregon, grave and deep alarm. Most assuredly, ". . .he was not afraid to acknowledge that he was alarmed to see the interests of this mighty Republic [more precisely of the South] precipitated and plunged heedlessly into a contest with Great Britain. . . ."[5]

In replying to Mr. Holmes's argument, Representative Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois expressed the sentiments of the majority of Northern and Western citizens. He said

> ...he did hope that there would be no dodging on this Oregon question. Yes; that there would be no delay; and he hoped that the gentleman from South Carolina would

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[4] Adams, The Power of Ideals, p. 83.

[5] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 126.

> show the same spirit and the same enthusiasm in behalf of Oregon that he had shown in behalf of Texas, and that he would be as brave and fearless in looking Great Britain in the face as he was in looking Mexico in the face.[6]

Thus raged the controversy. Northerners and Westerners argued that the mission of the people compelled the United States to take Oregon. Many Southerners feared that a war with Great Britain would endanger Texas and severely handicap the South's own "destiny" in this area. Most Whigs despised the thought of war with a reasonable nation which had numerous common characteristics with the United States. Furthermore, Whigs opposed the expansion of the United States as a danger to the compact Union.

All of these views were expressed repeatedly during the ensuing Congressional debates, especially in the House of Representatives. Also evident in these discussions is the serious conviction of the destiny of the United States and the mission of its citizens. From January 1846 until the outbreak of the Mexican hostilities in April and May, Oregon was the predominant consideration of the United States Congress.

A sampling of this Congressional activity is most enlightening in understanding the growing sense of American destiny. In January, Representative Frederick P. Stanton of Tennessee made a speech in which he attempted to explain the right of the United States to the Oregon territory based on mission and destiny. In prefacing his remarks, he observed that "We have arisen here, a mighty nation, fast approaching, and destined soon to surpass, the greatness of any European power." He proclaimed that the United States had ". . .undisputed rightful possession of a large portion of this continent, and neither reason nor authority will admit that the government of any unappropriate portion of it should be transferred to a distant nation."

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[6] Ibid.

Representative Stanton then made an important distinction between manifest destiny on the one hand, and mission and destiny on the other. He hoped he would be understood. "I do not mean to adopt that ground of title which had been assumed here by some gentlemen, under the imposing name of manifest destiny." Certainly, he pointed out, "It was the manifest destiny of England to spread her empire over a large portion of this continent, and of Asia." He emphasized, however, that ". . .that destiny, made manifest by complete fulfilment and perfect realization, neither commends itself to our minds as right, nor does it justify the arbitrary and oppressive measures by which it has been achieved." Rather, "I believe it is our destiny to possess the whole of Oregon; but this destiny does not make it right; it is our destiny, because it is right."[7] In other words, America's true destiny went far beyond the concept of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny implied right by might. America's destiny depended on right for right's sake—a Providential mandate to carry out the mission of a chosen people.

Was it, however, America's mission and destiny to achieve this task by war if necessary, which smacked of right by might? Representative Edward D. Baker, a pro-expansionist Whig of Illinois, commented on this problem. He felt that when a nation ceased to rely upon the sword to defend and secure the blessings it enjoyed, it had passed its best day. Any nation which, in fear of its adversary, conceded its just rights, was doomed to a rapid downfall. It was, finally, the destiny of nations to decline from the moment they timidly abandoned the protection of their rights.[8]

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[7] Ibid., p. 200.

[8] Ibid., p. 278.

Another opinion in this vein was voiced by Representative Joseph P. Hoge, also of Illinois, who said he ". . .did not like that patriotism which counted costs; which turned pale and trembled at the consequences; which hesitates, falters, and doubts when great national questions are to be decided, when great national interests are at stake."[9] To a majority of these representatives of the people, evidently it was thought to be America's destiny not only to seize Oregon but also to protect the honor and perpetuate the system of the United States. Great Britain, not the United States, was the potential aggressor; thus it was held that America's mission was to stand fast in protecting national rights and honor.

That consideration which actually presented a more serious problem than the question of possible conflict and which caused more discomfort was the question of America's title to the Oregon territory. In answering Massachusetts Representative Robert C. Winthrop's sarcastic questioning of this dubious title possibly found in some corner of "Adam's will," Representative William Sawyer of Ohio tacitly deliberated at some length in reference to it. He observed that

> ...our title dates further back; it is of a prior date; it comes from a period before Adam's dust was fashioned into man. This nation and its people...received [these] rights from high Heaven—from destiny, if you please. In the course of events—in the bringing forward and carrying out of this destiny—one Christopher Columbus was sent across the ocean to survey out partially this country; and here we have taken possession; here we have established the seat of empire, where the principles of pure republicanism and democracy shall finally prevail. ...there was one George Washington; he came forward, and located his family on this land; and we contend, from this location—from this early settlement, under the guidance of destiny—we have the right to every inch of this island, if you please to call it so.... We have the right from high Heaven to all of it—every inch of it.[10]

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[9] Ibid., p. 281.

[10] Ibid., p. 301.

Not only did this nation have a right to the whole of the continent, it was insisted, but the duty, the mission, of the nation was also to protect its kindred brethren in the territories and to think of future generations. As expressed by Senator Edward A. Hannegan of Indiana, "Our brethren in Oregon speak as I speak. I speak for my. . .state. She forbids all compromises by the surrender of a single foot of our territory. It is not the West alone that forbids it." Indeed not, "History, speaking from the sepulcher of the sainted dead forbids it. The shades of Washington, of Adams, of Henry, and of their immortal compeers, forbid it." Finally, he declared that

> By all the powers and glory of our country; in the name of the past, in the name of the unborn millions whose proud fortune it will be to direct the destinies of free America—I protest here, in the face of Heaven and all men, against any dismemberment of our territory—the surrender of our principles—the sacrifice of our honor![11]

Despite the emotionalism and the heroics, these declarations were forthright and earnest. Within months, the Oregon question, moreover, was peacefully resolved, although the whole of Oregon was not attained. The American destiny unquestionably appeared to be reaching achievement, especially after the Mexican War.

President Polk's actions in moving to resolve the question of Mexican-United States relations were so sudden that Congress and the people were unprepared for the result. The Mexican War was a unique experience for Americans. For the first time in its history the United States was involved in an offensive military undertaking on the soil of a foreign nation. Grave doubts were expressed as to the justification of such actions, despite President Polk's insistence that Mexico alone had

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[11] Ibid., p. 374.

commenced the fighting and his assurance that the United States was only protecting its unquestionable rights; in other words, possession of Texas and California.

Attitudes for and against the activities of the United States against Mexico assumed the character of sectionalism. The contention that "the most important modification of the expansion movement was that due to the progress of sectionalism"[12] is quite sound. Americans, once generally agreed on the question of the United States' destiny and its mission, became more sectional in outlook. Mission was still an integral part of the American credo, but it assumed variegated goals during the Mexican War.

The Mexican War was popular in the Mississippi Valley, for Texas and the states which bordered the Mississippi River furnished 49,000 volunteer troops. However, in the older states, there was little enthusiasm shown for the war, and much opposition. In fact only 13,000 troops were supplied by the original thirteen states. Antislavery and abolitionist elements, plus many other Northerners, regarded the earlier movement to annex Texas and now the Mexican War as a slave-holders' conspiracy.[13]

The South naturally had welcomed the addition of Texas as a state, and it looked forward to the creation of others from the potential Mexican cession. Confusing "association with cause," enemies of the South saw in the Texas phase of the westward movement a slave-holders' conspiracy to stake off new lands for their despised institution, and the result was

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[12] Garrison, Westward Extension, p. 11.

[13] Morison, Oxford History, p. 561; Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 72; Harold U. Faulkner, American Political and Social History (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p. 378.

opposition when Texas was annexed, and increased opposition to the war with Mexico. When expansionism prevailed over this opposition, however, "a principle most irritating to the South was advanced. It was embodied in the Wilmot Proviso."[14]

Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania in August, 1848, informed his colleagues that he felt the Mexican War was just and necessary, that it was not a war of conquest. Certainly he was favorable to a proper acquisition of territory in the Pacific area. But if such territory should come in, he declared himself opposed, "now and forever," to the inclusion of slavery in this territory, and the result was the now-famous Wilmot Proviso.[15] Although the Proviso was not accepted, Southerners nevertheless were quite angered and began to withdraw into the shell of their "peculiar society."

The South was not alone in its disillusionment. In the United States as a whole, despite the general popularity of the Mexican War, there was a growing sense of poor sportsmanship as the war continued. Abraham Lincoln, a Congressman during the war from Illinois, challenged the Administration with his well-known "Spot Resolution,"[16] demanding to know the exact location of the territory upon which American blood was shed, and whether these "citizens" were in actuality soldiers armed and sent to that location by the President. American historians "generally regard it as one of the less glorious episodes in the history of the United States although they accept it as a step in the inevitable American expansion to the Pacific."[17]

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[14] Francis Simkins, A History of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 111.

[15] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 1215, 1217.

[16] Ibid., 30th Congress, 1st session, XVII, 64.

[17] Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 324.

Public utterances concerning the war are interesting. In Congress, the majority supported the war and President Polk. It was a part of the nation's task, went the reasoning, to accomplish its mission and attain its destiny. The dissenting minority, however, also based their arguments on America's mission, and several of these arguments warrant our examination.

Albert Gallatin had argued earlier that on account of its geographical location, Texas should naturally be a member of the United States rather than of the Mexican Confederation. Still, "the annexation of Texas was no ordinary occurence [sic]. It was a most clear act of unprovoked aggression; a deep and most offensive injury; in fact a declaration of war if Mexico had accepted it as such." At the present time of the war, furthermore, all the true principles of Americanism seemed to have been abandoned. He pointed out that

> The most just, a purely defensive war, and no other is justifiable, is necessarily attended with a train of great and unavoidable evils. What shall we say of one, iniquitous in its origin, and provoked by ourselves, a war of aggression, which is now publicly avowed to be one of intended conquest.[18]

Whig Representative Luther Severance of Maine felt that it was the American peoples' mission and ". . .duty to see that our country was in the right in every conflict, and we could not advance the glory of the country by placing it in the wrong; and it was our special duty to preserve peace with the republics on this continent."[19] The gist of this argument became a major theme for many people: it was the United States' mission and duty to help the neighboring peoples, not subjugate them. Indeed,

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[18] Writings, III, 563, 566, 583.

[19] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 815.

"If Mexico is a weak nation, physically or morally, the more shame for us if we could have avoided the war, and have not."[20] Another contemporary asserted that ". . .we have regarded the Mexican War from the first as uncalled for, impolitic, and unjust."[21]

Besides being unjust, contended critics, the Mexican War purported to be a defensive one in nature. President Polk had insisted upon this. But one Representative asked "What part of the United States had any one invaded? Where had any portion of our territory been attacked?"[22] It was not a defensive war, but one of aggression, insisted the critics; it was President Polk's war. And Congress could not be held blameless, for it had echoed the "false statement" of the President, whereas it might have corrected the executive mistake. Yet

> ...it is not surprising that it took the President at his word. The late Congress [the 29th] had some able members, and it adopted some judicious measures; but we express only the common sentiment of all parties, when we say it was far from covering itself with glory, and that it is to be hoped another Congress like it will not meet again very soon.[23]

It is obvious, then, that public opinion was not wholly united behind the President and Congress, even though the sense of mission remained quite strong. The new problem was interpretation of mission. The war was quite unpopular with many people who had a strong sense of mission and destiny. As expressed by the author of The Biglow Papers,

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20 The American Review: A Whig Journal (New York: George H. Colton, 1846), III, 574.

21 Brownson's Quarterly Review (New York: Ams Press, 1965), IX, 360.

22 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2nd session, XVI, 34.

23 Brownson's Quarterly Review, IX, 363n.

"'Thet air flag's a leetle rotten, Hope it ain't your Sunday's best,'" or "'Ez for war, I call it murder—There you have it plain an' flat; I don't want to go no furder than my Testament far that. . . .'"[24]

All things considered, however, the Mexican War enabled the United States to obtain California. Polk, moreover, quickly squelched the movement to seize all Mexico despite the insistence that "It seemed that Destiny had decreed. . .we should overrun the whole of Mexico."[25] Polk the realist was able to distinguish between destiny and greed in this instance, and he acted in a commendable manner. America's mission to include Oregon, Texas, and California as parts of the United States had succeeded. The first phase of "Manifest Destiny" had reached its conclusion, and this concept would not re-appear until the latter half of the century. Mission and destiny, however, would soon be tested in the cataclysm of the Civil War.

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[24] Lowell, Essays, Poems, and Letters, pp. 223, 224.

[25] Congressional Globe, 30th Congress, 1st session, XVII, 329.

CHAPTER V

VOX POPULI, VOX DEI

During the four momentous years of Polk's administration, the American nation underwent an important mental metamorphosis as well as vast geographic change. Americans became more conscious of their nation's future, became more aware of the increasing position of importance and of responsibility the United States occupied in the world. A sense of America's mission was the dominant underlying factor in this awareness, for Americans were convinced that theirs was beyond doubt a chosen land.

Such feelings were, as we have noted, often expressed in direct reference to the Oregon and Mexican questions, but at the same time, a broader sense of mission and destiny was evolving. Americans in general looked beyond Oregon or California and determined to influence the future. For such an undertaking, it was natural that a deeper sense of mission and destiny should emerge.

To achieve the task before them, Americans found comfort in looking to the past for confirmation of their destiny and mission to improve the lot of mankind. As a result, this past-present-future interaction became an integral and major facet of the American mission complex.

The most effective means of illustrating this developing past-present-future pattern is to examine the words of the people themselves. Such examples necessarily are selective in a procedure of this type; but they may serve in a rough way to represent the various contemporary evaluations of the mission-sense of the time. Of course, not every American was fully

or constantly aware of this emotion, but that the national community had this sense of a high calling seems clear, beyond serious dispute.

The sense of mission in this decade was believed to be inherited from the forefathers, who were considered extraordinary human beings, thanks to the special design of Providence. Likewise, the North American continent had itself been especially selected as the domicile for these people. "We have regarded it [the New World] as a chosen land, . . .where [all] might come as to a holy asylum of peace and charity."[1] In other words, God had expressly chosen what had become the United States and had peopled it with "sifted wheat." As one writer put it,

> We have been accustomed to trace the hand of a merciful Providence in reserving this New World to so late a day for Christian civilization; we have been in the habit of believing that it was not without a providential design, that here was reserved an open field in which that civilization, disengaging itself from the vices and corruption...in the Old World, might display itself in all its purity, strength, and glory....

As to the mission of this society, it would ". . .work out for man here on earth a social order, which should give him a foretaste of that blessed social order to which the good hope to attain hereafter."[2]

This was the dream which Americans hoped to attain. But reality had proved to be less ethereal. The heaven on earth was not yet feasible. Therefore, the mission of the American people in the 1840's was likened to the task of a cultivator who prepares the earth for a future bountiful crop.

The addition of more territory to this promised land, as we have seen, was believed by many to be the major preliminary step in this cultivation. Yet the inner complexities of mission encompassed more than territorial expansion.

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[1] Brownson's Quarterly Review, VII, 77.

[2] Ibid.

Basic in this deeper concern with mission was the role of tradition. It was, for example, pointed out that ". . .there is a chart and compass for us to study, to consult, and to obey. That chart is the Constitution of the country. That compass is an honest, single-eyed purpose to preserve the institutions and the liberty with which God has blessed us."[3] Also, "Devotedness to country, or patriotism, is a most essential virtue, since the national existence of any society depends upon it."[4] Americans were admonished to guard against any straying from their calling through impetuosity or an excess of zeal. They were exhorted to be conscious of the traditions of the past, and to employ these traditions as useful tools in constructing the present and the future society.

One of the serious problems posed by an over-zealous missionary complex was thought to be the danger of prematurity. Older statesmen of the generation tried to convince the people that there was no need to hurry. Indeed, delay in many respects was a distinct advantage to a nation growing so rapidly into a position of greater relative strength.[5] The Oregon crisis especially concerned them, for they saw a conflict with Great Britain as disastrous to the mission of the United States. In the Senate, Calhoun attempted to point out the dangers of such a course. "We have been distinguished by Providence," he said, "for a great and noble purpose, and I trust we shall fulfil our high destiny." However, he continued, ". . .I am against war because peace——peace is pre-eminently

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[3] Daniel Webster, Writings and Speeches, ed. J. W. McIntyre, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1903), XIII, 365.

[4] Gallatin, Writings, III, 584.

[5] Fish, Rise of the Common Man, p. 292.

our policy. . . . Our great mission as a people is to occupy this vast domain. . . . War can only impede the fulfilment of this high mission of Heaven; it absorbs the wealth and diverts the energy which might be so much better devoted to the improvement of our country."[6]

In a similar vein Albert Gallatin pointed out that "For Americans Oregon is or will be home; for England it is but an outpost, which may afford means of annoyance rather than be a source of real power." He emphasized that "In America all have the same ultimate object in view; we differ only with respect to the means by which it may be attained."[7]

Others were less concerned with this danger of prematurity. For these persons, there was no time to waste. America's past history foretold future success. It was not just a question of possessing Oregon, or later, California. It was a question of duty. According to Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, ". . .our duty and our destiny are onward. We might as well attempt to stay the waves of the Pacific, as to stay the tide of emigration which is setting towards its shores."[8] Representative Orlando B. Ficklin of Illinois, pointing to this growing migration to the West, extolled these pioneers, saying, "These men have gone forth to found an empire, animated by the same noble and generous impulses which bore the pilgrim fathers across the deep to the rock of Plymouth, and which tempted Boone in ventures across the Cumberland mountains. . .through. . .Kentucky to the banks of the majestic Ohio." In these noble pioneers, he asserted, there is ". . .no touch of sordid or mercenary feeling," for "They go

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6 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 505.

7 Writings, III, 514.

8 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 46.

forth to see, to explore, and to inhabit the green and glad earth which God has given them, and ocean and mountain barriers will not restrain, cannot limit, their onward march."[9]

The progress which the American nation had made since its beginnings was proof of the importance of their mission to its inhabitants. The United States was a great nation, but it was to be made even greater. Territorial growth was but a part of such future greatness. Two centuries ago, pointed out Representative William F. Niles of Maryland,

> America was the home of the prowling savage; but what is it today? The pride of nations. Here was enjoyed the purest liberty which the earth had ever seen, and ours was destined to be the greatest Government the world had ever witnessed if we were but true to ourselves and to our position.[10]

Americans generally agreed that their nation had an enviable record of past achievement. And the future? One observer felt that what the nation's destiny would be ". . .was known only to higher powers than those of earth." Human beings were not permitted to read the destiny of nations. He felt that the United States' "ultimate destiny was not yet manifested."[11] This viewpoint, however, was not widespread. "That man must be poor in discernment," it was reasoned, "who could see nothing like a destiny of freedom, of wealth and power, in a country like ours. . . . There was such a thing as a destiny for this American race—a destiny that would yet appear upon the great chart of human history."[12]

In taking stock, it becomes clear that for Americans the future beckoned with tremendous promise. American traditions, American liberty, American government—all enhanced the future greatness of the United

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[9] Ibid., p. 329.

[10] Ibid., p. 72.

[11] Ibid., p. 159.

[12] Ibid.

States. Soon the entire continent would be peopled by Americans, who would spread this bountiful harvest over a vast expanse. Soon the flag, as the American sense of mission decreed, would ". . .shed its lustre over every hill and plain on the Pacific slope, and on every stream that mingles with the Pacific."[13] Finally, it was asked, "What. . .was destiny? Was it not the duty of every statesman to look, not only at what a country is, but to look forward and see what (by the blessings of God) it may become?"[14]

In this scheme of things for continued future greatness, it was generally acknowledged that the West would play the leading role. There was opposition: "The territory of the Union is large enough, and he is as poor a patriot as he is a statesman who would seek to extend its bounds."[15] No matter; such an argument was illogical in the face of American mission and destiny. "It is to the West, the agricultural West, her community of independent farmers, . . .that the eye of the statesman must turn with prophetic hope for the patriotic race who are destined to preserve the principles of a democratic liberty."[16] Such hope in the West and in the independent farmers indeed became a main point in the mission complex, for this was still the dream of the Populist Party in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

As Americans pursued their mission dream into the West, and possibly beyond, they were carefully watched and judged from abroad. This was especially true of England, the nation most similar in custom to the United States. In Great Britain, the United States' increasing

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13 Ibid., p. 189.

14 Ibid., p. 279.

15 Brownson's Quarterly Review, IX, 367.

16 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 1061.

preoccupation with its sense of mission and destiny elicited interesting comments from British observers.

In 1846 there appeared in Blackwood's Magazine an article entitled "How They Manage Affairs in the 'Model Republic'." In reference to the American penchant for destiny, the writer of the article remarked:

> 'We are quite content, if they will permit us, to remain on the best of terms with our trans-atlantic descendents, and to see them happy and prosperous in their own way. We even think it fortunate for mankind that the principle of self-government is being worked out in that remote region, and under the most favorable circumstances, in order that the civilized world may take note thereof, and guide itself accordingly.'[17]

Obviously there were Britons who, though not quite so enthralled with American progress and future hopes as were Americans themselves, believed as Americans did that the Young Republic had a civilizing mission.

When Charles Dickens wrote his famous novel Martin Chuzzlewit, he utilized this work to comment on numerous impressions which were the results of his earlier visits to America. His views relating to the United States' concept of its mission as a chosen nation and its destiny are of interest. To Martin Chuzzlewit, Americans appeared to be conceited, self-centered, shallow, and under the illusion that they were the perfect race and that their nation alone would survive:

> 'You have brought, I see sir,' he said, turning round towards Martin, and resting his chin on the top of his stick, 'the usual amount of misery and poverty and ignorance and crime, to be located in the bosom of the Great Republic. Well, sir! let'em come on in ship-loads from the old country. When vessels are about to founder, the rats are said to leave'em. There is considerable of truth, I find, in that remark.'[18]

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[17] Littell's Living Age (Boston: Waite, Peirce and Co., 1846), IX, 321.

[18] Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, Parts One and Two, Vol. VII of The Works of Charles Dickens (New York: Bigelow, Brown and Co., 1868), pp. 353-354.

Martin, however, upon further observation, discovered that Americans were actually not so optimistic:

> Martin knew nothing about America, or he would have known perfectly well that if its individual citizens, to a man, are to be believed, it always _is_ depressed, and always _is_ stagnated, and always _is_ at an alarming crisis, and never was otherwise; though as a body they are ready to make oath upon the Evangelists at any hour of the day or night that it is the most thriving and prosperous of all countries on the habitable globe.[19]

Americans, none the less, were not perturbed by such external criticism, regardless of its intensity, for they had complete faith in their Providential mission. Indeed, many British travelers in America during this period noted, contrary to Dickens's evaluation, that every American spoke as if he had a personal stake in his country's fortune. As a result, it was not hard to understand that the standard phrase of Americans was "We are a great people." They felt that their country was the greatest in the world, that their countrymen were the most gifted, that their government was the best, that their laws were the purest, and their institutions the wisest.[20] Certainly Americans felt this way; it was not mere boastfulness, really, but an overpowering exhuberance growing out of consciousness of heaven-appointed mission. In retrospect, moreover, it would seem that the American determination to reach explicit national goals was largely successful because of this sense that God had thus ordained it. Americans were proud of their past and were intoxicated with their present, but they looked to their future, to their destiny. They envisioned a better world, one which would be steadily improved because they were dedicated to spreading America's benign principles and institutions.

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[19] _Ibid._, p. 368.

[20] Berger, _The British Traveller_, pp. 62-63.

CHAPTER VI

"GO YE THEREFORE. . . ."

The Mexican War reminded Americans that territorial acquisition alone did not mean their mission was accomplished. Physical expansion was certainly a part of the mission concept, but as Americans contemplated the meaning of the Mexican War, they beheld an opportunity to implement more fully their mission dream, and to transmute this dream into reality. They foresaw the establishment of that heaven on earth for which they had yearned so long. The year 1846 was without question the year of decision in the evolution of the American sense of mission.

The role which they might possibly play in bettering their world mesmerized Americans. The fact that they might spread the ideals and institutions of America to others steeled them to the task. So it was at this time that a more ambitious plan for American destiny was sensed by many——a plan which could affect the whole of mankind.

Even as late as 1845, there were Americans who continued to express doubts as to the wisdom of extending the territorial boundaries of the United States. Daniel Webster, in listing reasons for his opposition to the annexation of Texas, remarked that "In the first place. . .there must be some limit to the extent of our territory if we would make our institutions permanent. . . ." Second, he had always desired that the nation exhibit the qualities of a great and powerful Republic, "which is not possessed by a spirit of aggrandizement. . . ." Finally, in adhering to the principles of the hallowed Constitution, he could never persuade himself "to be in

favor of the admission of other States into the Union as slave States. . . ."[1] Webster and others[2] also felt that such extension would result in the loss of common national identity.

As to the possibility of the spread of American institutions over the world, Webster said that while he felt they would ultimately cover the globe, he was "by no means sure that all people are fit for them"; nor did he desire to impose or enforce "our peculiar forms upon any nation that does not wish to embrace them."[3] While Webster was by no means alone in expressing such opinions, the American people en masse felt it was their mission to see that these people became fit for American institutions.

As a result of such feeling, before, during, and after the Mexican War a wide assortment of Americans, by no means a lunatic fringe, without reservation declared that if the United States did not extend her empire of liberty to the Isthmus of Panama, she would be false to her sense of destiny.[4] We have seen that President Polk quickly terminated this movement, justifiably suspecting that in many cases more was involved than a sense of mission and destiny. Besides, Polk's idea of mission was somewhat narrower and more utilitarian than that generally being advanced at the time. Finally, it is understandable that the line between absorption of Mexico for the sake of its people and absorption for the sake of more territory was exceedingly fine. The point is, however, that even though

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[1] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 88.

[2] Representative Columbus Delano of Ohio in February 1846 declared that "He feared this system of spreading, for it must ultimately lead to the destruction of this country. Its identity would be lost." Ibid., p. 317.

[3] Writings and Speeches, XIII, 359, 360.

[4] Boorstin, National Experience, pp. 272-273.

Mexico would not be absorbed, the desire to endow its people with American institutions and customs grew even stronger, and soon came to include others besides Mexicans.

A further noteworthy distinction which Americans were making was the increasingly obvious one between "manifest destiny" alone and mission. Manifest destiny remained a factor, a major factor, in the overall conception of national purpose, but it was becoming subordinate to the more salutary mission drive. Without doubt the belief persisted that America's incorporation of all adjacent lands was a task delegated by Providence itself. Manifest destiny continued to hold the glittering promise of more slave lands in Mexico, Central America, and even Cuba. Expansionists continued to declare that territorial extension was necessary for the fullest liberty of the individual.[5] Yet it was no longer a question simply of acquiring territory, but one also of molding this territory and its inhabitants into an American facsimile. Thus expansionism had acquired a new emotion. It was the American destiny to spread our free and admirable institutions by direct initiative as well as by example. The preservation and perfection of the American social ideal was America's providential mission.[6] If territory were now to be seized, it would be for this reason, not just because it was there.

This sense of altruism which now guided mission seemingly was not so apparent to some. As one writer lamented,

> We raise our voice, feeble though it may be, and unheeded as we fear it will be, to contribute our mite to stay the advancing tide of ruin. We have raised it with a patriot's love, and with a patriot's grief; but with[a]

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[5] Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, pp. 1-2, 116; Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York: Vintage Press, 1956), p. 26.

[6] DeVoto, Year of Decision, pp. 8-9; Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, p. 100.

> Christian's hope. Bad as appearances are, a good God as well as a just God watches over us, and we dare not distrust his mercy. It may be he will have mercy on our nation; that he will yet make ours the chosen land of his abode; that he will in very deed be our God, and we shall be his people. We would not see our experiment in behalf of popular freedom fail; we would see it succeed. It will not fail, and it will succeed, if we return to God, put our trust in him, and live for the end which he has appointed us.[7]

There was indeed a danger in this altruism of mission, for at first the expansionist became concerned about other peoples only as he conceived of them as in some sense American.[8] In this period, such concern was nevertheless based on a desire to improve the lot of others, whatever the initial impetus. It is not our task, moreover, to judge this mission sense but to interpret its meanings.

At the beginning of Polk's administration, Albert Gallatin, who would die in the last year of this administration, declared that the mission of the United States ". . .is to improve the state of the world, to be the 'model republic,' to show that men are capable of governing themselves. . . ." In addition, it was to show ". . .that this simple and natural form of government is that also which confers happiness on all, is productive of the greatest development of the intellectual faculties, above all, that which is attended with the highest standard of private and political virtue and morality."[9] Such a conception of national duty became the clarion call to Americans during the Polk administration. As a famous poet later wrote in "Leaves of Grass," when referring to this turbulent decade of America's full awareness of its sense of destiny and mission:

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[7] Brownson's Quarterly Review, III, 61.

[8] Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, p. 124.

[9] Writings, III, 581, 582.

'Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shown upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands....'[10]

This altruistic mission was present during the Oregon crisis, less explicit of course than manifest destiny, which was then at its apogee. Daniel Webster, one of the staunchest of the anti-expansionists, nevertheless revealed at the Whig caucus of 1845 that "I believe. . .it is the course of Providence and of human destiny that a great State is to arise, of English and American descent, whose power will be established over the country on the shores of the Pacific"; most important, ". . .all those rights of natural and political liberty, all those great principles that both nations have inherited from their fathers, will be transmitted through us to them. . . ."[11] Although he did not acknowledge the inevitability of manifest destiny (for this was to be an independent State arising out of the ashes of the British-American problem concerning Oregon), Webster did foresee in the transmission of American principles to this great State the guiding light of its development. Even Lewis Cass of Michigan, an ardent expansionist, revealed a deeper insight at one point in his demands for the whole of Oregon. "We have an adhesive and life-preserving principle, in the exercises of political power by the great body of the people, which is a surer bond of union and preservation than fleets and armies and central powers."[12]

There were other similar expressions during the Oregon debates, implying conviction of a deeper mission involved beyond manifest destiny.

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[10] Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry, Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1959), p. 87.

[11] Writings and Speeches, XIII, 314.

[12] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 46-47.

Representative Cornelius Darragh, a Pennsylvania Whig, ". . .believed it to be the design of God that our free institutions. . .should eventually cover this whole continent—a consummation which could not but affect every part of the world, and the prospect of which ought to fill with joy the heart of every philanthropic man."[13] Our Republic, according to Senator Sidney Breese of Illinois, desired Oregon

> ...from no selfish or ambitious views, nor in a craving spirit of more territorial aggrandizement, but in order to extend more widely the area of human freedom, and the means of human happiness, as an extension of that theatre in which God, in his providence, intends to work out that high destiny he has assigned...for the whole human race.[14]

Normally, such statements in consideration of the Oregon question were the exception rather than the rule, for there was more concern for America's rights as opposed to English interference and for America's destiny to spread physically over all the continent.

Then came the Mexican War. Americans found their nation in conflict with a weaker power, whose people were not of the Anglo-Saxon race, and who were in the main poor and backward. It was still considered America's manifest destiny to spread to the Pacific; but the chief concern of the majority of Americans became that of their mission to improve the condition of the Mexican people, and hopefully of the whole world.

Just as manifest destiny was the "will of God," so was the task of disseminating American democracy and Republicanism. To the most bountiful nation on earth had been assigned the task of extending its society to others less fortunate in the world. In the words of Senator

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[13] Ibid., p. 131.

[14] Ibid., p. 445.

John Crittenden of Kentucky,

> Our own happy land is crowned with plenty, surpassing in fertility and abundance anything in the history of nations. Do not these blessings lay any obligation upon us? From him to whom much is given much will be required. The very abundance with which we are blessed increases our obligation to act generously...charitably and justly....[15]

It was inevitable that certain weaknesses and fallacies would penetrate this veil of benevolence envisioned by the American people. A feeling of condescension, although unintentional, went hand in hand with the duty of mission. Americans were self-engrossed; to a degree they were actually indifferent to these "heathen peoples" because they felt the best material for the creation of their ideal was the American race itself. It is not surprising that the "white man's burden" ideology was anticipated by the expansionism of the Mexican War, for there developed the feeling of an obligation to these darker peoples. Expansionists began to contemplate not merely the regeneration of the Mexican people but a whole series of civilizing enterprises among the lesser breeds.[16]

There was little doubt among Americans that any of these future regenerates would resist their Americanization. Rather they would be forever grateful. And perchance if there happened to be some resistence, it would be the product of ignorance; the duty and mission of the American would be to redeem this unfortunate victim at any cost. What was normal for the American would become salvation for those outside the realm of democracy and freedom. This predilection on the part of Americans was in no small way encouraged by many Mexicans, who hoped that the United States would carry its conquest even further in order to bring peace and tranquility

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[15] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2nd session, XVI, 512.

[16] Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, pp. 128, 179-180.

to their long-troubled country.[17] To what extent they entertained the possibilities of annexation by the United States is not known. But the determination of President Polk to conclude a peace treaty eliminated any actions in that direction.

During the war, much was said in Congress about the rights of the United States, as the conqueror, to incorporate subdued territory, and it was insisted that this was the true destiny of the white Anglo-Saxon race. More important, though, was the growing attitude that spoliation of Mexico was not the mission of the United States——Mexico, whether territory was seized or not, depended upon the United States for its redemption and salvation. The actual American attitude was possibly best expressed by a character in Martin Chuzzlewit when he said "'What are the United States for, sir, . . .if not for the regeneration of man'?"[18]

The critics of the Mexican War and of the methods of President Polk were really indirectly responsible for the reoriented direction of mission and destiny. It was declared that the United States had no right to impose terms on Mexico inconsistent with justice. Acquisition of territory or any other advantage based on the success of arms would be a shameful dereliction of principle.[19] One writer insisted that this war, if unsuccessful, would disgrace the United States; if successful, it would weaken Mexico, "already too weak for our interest." The true policy of the nation should be rather to preserve Mexican nationality and independence, and to strengthen her.[20] Yes, to strengthen Mexico: that would be a major part

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[17] Herring, History of Latin America, p. 324.

[18] Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, p. 476.

[19] Gallatin, Writings, III, 559.

[20] Brownson's Quarterly Review, IX, 366.

of America's mission. Mexico would receive strength and maintenance of her nationality by the infusion of American democracy and Republicanism.

War was the antithesis of such a mission. The United States, the leading Republic of the continent and of the world, often called the "model Republic," reported one journal in 1846, has ". . .gone to war; we whose special mission it was to show the world what pre-eminent gain was to be found in the assiduous cultivation of the arts of peace, and the practice of unambitious virtues—justice, moderation, contentment—so indispensible to the preservation of representative forms, and the maintenance of personal and popular freedom."[21] Instead of making war on this weak nation, then, the United States should fulfill its mission by leading rather than driving the Mexicans. Early in the war, Senator Crittenden declared that "As the head of the republican system our policy was to cheer and cherish [the Mexicans], and lead them in the way to that liberty we had established, and of which we had set the example."[22] Americans were urged to remember their providential role, to remember the past events which had made their nation worthy to be called the "model Republic." Aggression was in no way a part of the past tradition.

These critics were heeded—to a point. It was agreed that war was not a fit instrument for the American sense of mission. But, it was remonstrated, the United States had not started the war; Mexico had been the aggressor. In the prosecution of the war, the United States had seized large portions of Mexican territory. Indeed, to a people badly governed, or hardly governed at all, the establishment of enlightened and liberal government would most assuredly be a blessing.[23] As to strengthening

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[21] The American Review, III, 571.

[22] Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st session, XV, 788.

[23] Ibid., 29th Congress, 2nd session, XVI, 23.

and guaranteeing the Mexican nationality, it was attested that supposedly Mexicans could not alone develop their nation; they were not the race to do it. Americans, whether from North or South, would secure blessings to that region.[24] A retort to such an assertion was that of Gallatin: "Is it compatible with the principle of democracy, which rejects every hereditary claim of individuals, to admit an hereditary superiority of races?"[25] Gallatin, despite his logical reasoning, was in the minority on this question.

It was assumed by and large that the Mexicans were ignorant, feeble, and stationary. They were to have another chance, however. With the coming of the Americans, generations of abuses would be swept away, and light and knowledge would spread over Mexico. For example, the seizure of California and New Mexico would mean that the entire population therein would be objects of envy rather than of commiseration, and would regard it as "a special interposition of Providential favor."[26] Above all, the Mexicans, like all other inhabitants under the influence of the United States, would enjoy that degree of civilization and independence which they deserved, "and the free and glorious civilization of our people will press onward until it covers the American continent."[27]

In the end, of course, neither proposal gained a clear-cut victory. Annexation of Mexico was not achieved, and the idyllic Mexican society as proposed was not to become a reality in that time. There was, nevertheless, a victory for mission; the fact that Americans looked beyond themselves and

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[24] Ibid., p. 138.

[25] Writings, III, 584-585.

[26] Congressional Globe, 30th Congress, 1st session, XVII, 490, 158.

[27] Ibid., p. 201.

beyond their time in hope of bettering the world was this victory. Latent until Polk's administration, the sense of mission was then promoted to a full standing in the American credo. In the near future, it would become a major factor in American history, for the Civil War was fought by Americans committed to different interpretations of mission. The South's mission was not only to maintain but to extend its "peculiar society," while the North's mission was to assure every man the right of life, liberty, and equality.

In 1849, Americans were fully aware of the changes wrought in the previous nine years, especially the last four years during Polk's administration. What lay ahead in the future? Already the slavery problem was gaining fateful momentum, and as suggested before, mission was pursued increasingly in a sectional context. Even so, it was still surmised that per se the United States was destined to become one of the great nations of the world, and that its institutions would become the rich patrimony of mankind. A trifle shallow at times, in other instances somewhat overbearing, the true sense of American mission nevertheless seems to have been completely sincere. For that reason it continued as, and remains, a dominant force in the fruition of American principles and ideals.

With these recent changes and the possible causes for them in mind, a writer undertook to evaluate the country's position in 1849 and to venture a glimpse at its future, saying

> Our country has entered on a new epoch in its history. From this year we take a new start in national development; one that must, more than ever before, draw the world's history into the stream of ours. This enlargement of our own national sphere takes place, too, remarkably enough, just at the time when the whole old-settled order of things in Europe is breaking up and passing forever away; and the old world turns its eyes to the new with a sense never felt before, that its destiny is bound up with ours.

> Now, for what purposes has the providence of God conducted our nation unconsciously through the events of the last three years, to the edge and prospect of such a stupendous startling future...? We have seen that all causes portend a new centralization of the nations; and that our country seems destined, in the coming age, to be the new historical centre of the earth——the mediator between both sides of the old world.[28]

Remembering that this was written in 1849, one is naturally impressed with the author's ability to prognosticate the future role of America with such accuracy. Yet it is not so surprising. The American mission was known to be the improvement of mankind's existence through the spread of American institutions, and all the force of American determination indubitably would be employed in the accomplishment of this calling. For this was America's destiny, a destiny assigned by Providence; and since God was for them, they knew that no one could be against them.

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[28] The American Review, III, pp. 334, 335.

CHAPTER VII

REFLECTIONS

The sense of American destiny and mission, particularly the latter, has increased in importance and intensity since the decade of the 1840's. Modern Americans, just as their nineteenth century counterparts, are basically idealistic and philanthropic. They are recognized throughout most of the world as the self-appointed benefactors of mankind. Such recognition, moreover, has developed as a direct result of the American sense of mission.

It was proposed in an earlier chapter that the first pioneers to inhabit the North American continent in the seventeenth century had a deep sense of mission. The main focus of this study has been fixed upon the emergence of the sense of mission during the administration of James Knox Polk. Is this to say that between 1607 and 1844, the sense of mission had no bearing in the American development? Certainly not.

The distinction between mission previous to 1844 and mission between 1844 and 1849 results from difference in emphasis rather than from a lack of emphasis. The ordinary American citizen was actually in a political void until the administrations of Andrew Jackson, who personally inaugurated the rise of the common man. Until that time, America's mission had been in the hands of a select few. The common man certainly had a sense of mission, but he and his peers were only remotely involved in its effectuation.

When the people's President took office in 1829, the average citizen was given his opportunity to act. Many continued in their

lethargy to follow a laissez-faire attitude toward political participation. But most Americans embraced their new-found political opportunity and began to prepare themselves for the right of participation.

Upon James K. Polk's election in 1844, the American common man found himself in a maelstrom of activity. President Polk himself was a man with a mission and a man of self-directed action. Often called "Young Hickory" because of his admiration for and emulation of Andrew Jackson, Polk was determined to carry out his political program, and he was adamant to any hesitancy or opposition. The activity which resulted from Polk's determination thus rekindled the long-smoldering mission sense of the American people.

From 1845 to 1849, the United States underwent vast physical and mental alteration. The territorial expanse of the country was greatly augmented. More striking was the change in the American political and social mentality. No longer were most Americans concerned only with their compact Union. They looked to the West, to the Pacific, and dreamed of the destiny of their nation, certainly decreed by God, to spread there. This sense of manifest destiny became an obsession with the majority of the people; but in a brief time a deeper sense of destiny and mission relegated manifest destiny to a secondary role.

As Americans witnessed the growth of their nation in size and in strength, they were overwhelmed with a sense of concern and obligation to the other people of the world. From that short four-year span until the present, this feeling has been a major part of the American credo.

If all nations have a sense of destiny and mission, and surely they must, why has the American sense of destiny and mission been so pronounced? The American mission first of all had its roots in the Puritan ethic, which was dependent on a stern but just God, and which was based on a

theory of obligation, contractual duty, and subsequent reward. Democracy also was a manifestation of the earlier Puritan ethic. After the impact of Jacksonian democracy upon the common man, therefore, democracy and mission were fused. It became the American mission to spread democracy and its related benefits to others in the world. By 1844, furthermore, the American nation was richer and stronger than at any previous time in its history. Consequently, the sense of mission became more urgent; the powerful United States was destined, agreed Americans, to become the benefactor of the world, depositing its systems and institutions with the remaining eagerly waiting nations.

This preconception engendered in the 1840's has not been entirely successful, as is well known. There are today peoples and nations throughout the world which resent this American sense of mission, considered at times to be too brusque and materialistic. And perhaps in many ways they are right. Yet if they better understood the American sense of mission and destiny, a buoyant, effervescent hopefulness, they would better understand the American people and their undertakings.

Without a sense of mission, there would never have been and would not be the ever-beckoning American dream——a dream assuring that with faith and effort, that better world will some day be a reality.

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